



# MARGINALIZATION AND HOMOSEXUALITY IN “THE BOYFRIEND” BY R.RAJ RAO

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## ABSTRACT

Homosexuality has often been stigmatized in many cultures, leading to negative attitudes and prejudices against LGBT+ individuals. While homosexuality is evident in ancient Indian literature, culture, and architecture, it is regarded as alien to Indian culture, often perceived as a taboo and deviating from the norm. It is seen as an immoral act, despite historical indications of the presence of lesbians and gays in various aspects of Indian society. In the homophobic Indian society, individuals identifying as homosexual face discrimination and find themselves marginalized. They are unable to fully integrate into mainstream Indian culture and are compelled to conceal their sexual orientation, leading double lives as both heterosexual and homosexual. Homosexuality is deemed uncivilized and immoral by the majority, denying these individuals the opportunity to live a normal life. Constant surveillance becomes a part of their existence, prompting them to seek spaces where they can live without scrutiny, away from prying eyes. This social stigma results in marginalization, exclusion, and even hostility towards people based on their sexual orientation. R.Raj Rao's novel "The Boyfriend" explores the themes of marginalization and homosexuality in Indian society. Through the character of Yudi and his dalit lover Milind, the novel depicts the challenges faced by individuals who do not conform to the societal norms of caste, class, religion, and masculinity. This research paper aims to examine how the novel portrays the themes of marginalization and homosexuality, and their intersectionality in the Indian context. The paper argues that "The Boyfriend" provides a unique perspective on the experiences of the LGBTQ+ community in India, and highlights the need for greater acceptance and inclusion of marginalized communities in Indian society.

**KEYWORDS:** Marginalization, Homosexuality, LGBT, Discrimination, Gender

## INTRODUCTION

Marginalization pertains to individuals or groups living on the fringes of society, often experiencing historical or cultural disconnection, as they exist between social classes or cultural communities without full integration. In the realm of cultural anthropology, the study of marginalization focuses on examining the social situations of ethnic groups facing various forms of marginalization, such as class, caste, gender, and community divisions. These groups often endure economic and social hardships, experiencing multiple layers of marginalization in countries like India, which has undergone significant socio-political transformations. It is crucial to understand that the manifestations of marginalization can differ, with connections to the overall development of a society, both culturally and, importantly, economically (Sanjeev Kumar, 2014).

Along with racial, ethnic and religious minorities another community which is facing the brunt of marginalization is lesbian/gay/bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community. Historically and in some contemporary contexts, individuals who identify as homosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT+) have experienced varying degrees of marginalization and discrimination. Social stigma, legal discrimination, family and community rejection, violence and hate and lack of representation are some of the issues these communities go through on a daily basis. R.Raj Rao's novel "The Boyfriend" explores how marginalization and homosexuality are interlinked. Rao through this novel explores the realities of caste, class, religion, masculinity and the gay subculture in India.

R. Raj Rao is a prominent gay-rights activist in India, known for his ground-breaking contributions to queer literature and film. His novel, *The Boyfriend* (2003), was among the first of its kind to be published in India, and his non-fiction work, *Whistling in the Dark* (2009), explores issues of sexuality and identity in Indian society. Rao's poetry collection, *BOMGaY*, served as inspiration for Riyad Vinci Wadia's ground-breaking film, *Bomgay* (1996), widely regarded as India's first gay film.

The success of "The Boyfriend" led Rao to establish the Queer Studies Circle at Pune University, where he offered one of the first courses on LGBT literature at the university level in India. This achievement was not without its challenges, as Rao faced resistance from academic authorities for years before finally being able to offer the course in 2007 (Hufaz Pandit, 2013). Despite these obstacles, Rao's pioneering work has paved the way for greater acceptance and inclusion of marginalized communities in Indian society.

Rao's novel "The Boyfriend" serves as a wake-up call, prompting readers to question their beliefs and attitudes towards the rights and freedoms of gay men in a country like India and acknowledges the presence of queer subculture in Bombay, recognizing it as an integral part of Indian culture. This serves as a powerful counter to the homophobic nationalist rhetoric that perpetuates the idea

of a "normal" sexuality and excludes those who fall outside of this narrow definition which is steeped in tradition and cultural norms. It's a thought-provoking read that sheds light on the struggles faced by the LGBTQ+ community in India and challenges readers to reconsider their perspectives. The book is a powerful tool in the fight for equal rights and freedom, offering eye-opening insights that will leave readers stunned and inspired to take action.

Yudi, the protagonist of the novel, is a freelance journalist who is in his forties lives a secret gay life in Mumbai. He gets involved in a hurried sexual intercourse with a nineteen-year-old dalit boy, Milind in a Church gate railway station toilet and gets rid of him thinking is a pimp.

Milind fakes his name to Yudi as Kishore Mahadik, leaves a lasting impression on Yudi, who eventually realizes he is in love with him. However, Yudi is unable to locate Kishore because the name and address he provided were wrong. Meanwhile, Yudi's editor introduces him to a promising young painter named Gauri, who inadvertently leads him to meet Kishore, whose real name is Milind Mahadik. Milind is an untouchable, which does not faze Yudi, who himself is an outcast due to his homosexuality and orthodox Brahmin upbringing. They spend happy times together, and Yudi takes Milind to various places, introducing him to new experiences. The story highlights the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in concealing their identity to survive in a hostile environment, and the fluidity of gender and identity that allows them to do so. Yudi's journey in the book explores these themes and reveals the complexities of navigating societal norms and expectations as a gay man in India.

The story shows how Yudi vacillates between consciously taking on the role of a feminine hijra during sex and adopting more traditionally "womanly" traits in his relationship with men, as seen through the lens of patriarchal norms. The novel highlights the complexity of Yudi's sexuality, revealing how societal expectations and norms can shape even the most intimate aspects of one's identity (Oliver Ross, 2014). This analytical characterisation creates a hypothetical heterosexist structure where two homosexual men engaging each other exposes their servile sexual lives in a negative way. A synecdoche of the reconfigurations of the limited sexual space in the realm of urban homosexuality is this hidden, closed-off reality. Being cast in a part that represents their lifestyle says bluntly about their integration into the dominant culture.

The novel depicts Yudi and Milind as being separated by various societal constructs such as class, caste, age, language, education, and religion. Rao's recalls that of Dennis Altman (2001), who claims of the 'developing world':

*The romantic myth of homosexual identity cutting across class, race, and so on doesn't work in practice any more than it does in the West. The experience of sexuality in everyday life is shaped by such variables as the gap between city and country; ethnic and religious differences; and hierarchies of health,*

*education, and age. The idea of a gay or lesbian/gay community assumes that such differences can be subordinated to an overarching sense of sexual identity, a myth that is barely sustainable in comparatively rich and affluent societies. (p.34)*

This class structure is based on both the parameters –the Vedic categorizations of class as castes and the Marxist divisions on the basis of economics. According to the Vedic categorizations, the topmost is a Brahman and the lowest in the category was the Shudras. Raj Rao very perfectly portrays the novel with the homosexual in a woman's role to be a Brahman, in the character of Yudi, and the homosexual in a man's role to be a Shudra, in the character of Milind Mahadik. Despite their shared sexual orientation, their experiences are shaped by their social positions and conditioning. In his oscillation between fetishism and repulsiveness, Yudi vilifies the "working-class" body, and his synecdochic degradation of Milind into broken-down bodily traits—"the smell of sweat," "a pair of slippers," and "uncut toenails"—creates a persistent sensation of estrangement.

The severe socioeconomic disparities that Rao creates as a result of the men's physical differences include Milind insisting that Yudi lives in a "posh area" and asking him what language he speaks at home. In a feeble attempt to minimise the privilege of the Anglophone elite, Yudi responds, "English," "quickly," adding "and Hindi". Milind was referred to by Yudi as an illiterate and a slave during their visit to Shrivana Belagola, which is an important point to notice. The couple's feud became more intense there. Their relationship took a turn, and they eventually split up. Later, Milind's family arranges for him to be married off to a member of his own caste, and he breaks off all communication with Yudi.

In the novel "The Boyfriend" Roy explored not only gender identity but also interrogated the conjugation of class and caste, religion and masculinity in the Indian context. Rao challenges Yudi's idealistic perspective, showing it to be irrational and contradictory in the process. Yudi gets angry when Milind tells him to finish the wafers that he has partly eaten in order to see if he is truly bothered by his caste or not. Yudi says:

*"Homos are no different from Bhangis. Both are Untouchables. So why should I have a problem with eating your jootha?"*

*"But you are a Brahman, aren't you?"*

*"No, I am a homosexual. Gay by caste. Gay by religion."*

*"I don't understand what you are saying."*

*"What I am saying is that homosexuals have no caste or religion. They have only their homosexuality."*

*"How can that be?"*

*"That's how it is. Straight people are Brahmins, gays Shudras. So you see, both you and I are Shudras. That's why we are best friends." (81-82)*

In the end of the novel "The Boyfriend", portrays a stark and biting satire when Milind returns to Yudi seeking financial assistance. The story draws on the mythological figures of Lord Krishna and Sudama, with Yudi taking on the role of Krishna and Milind that of Sudama. In a deliberate mockery of pseudo-heterosexist social traditions, Yudi washes Milind's feet in a re-enactment of a religious ritual. Raj Rao's careful portrayal of this situation highlights the way in which religion can be used as a tool to perpetuate oppressive social structures, particularly for those in marginalized communities such as the untouchable Shudras in post-modern India.

Social inequality is based on many multi-layered categorizations including caste system, economical structure, religion, education, homosexuality and conception of homosexuality among different classes. In the novel, Milind thinks that only upper/high class people accept alternative sexuality and believes in practicing this lifestyle while Parmeshwar, the owner of an agency where Milind worked considers homosexuality is most prevalent among lower and illiterate people.

In India, LGBTQ individuals face deep-rooted discrimination and are subjected to social prejudices and myths. They are denied their basic rights to love and be loved, leading to social degradation and psychological torture. This oppressive environment leaves them feeling isolated and self-pitying. Indian literature offers limited space for the depiction of queer characters, making it difficult for them to express themselves. Queer theory helps expand the understanding of gender identity and challenges the traditional notion of "Gender Dichotomy" (Chandran et al., 2019). Sexuality remains a taboo topic in society, particularly for transgender individuals, who are forced to live forbidden lives without support from the government or society.

Some writers have explored and written about queer experiences, focusing on their sexuality and their place in society. Devdutt Pattanaik's "The Pregnant King" and "Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don't Tell" delve into the origins of queerness in ancient mythical texts. Additionally, Vivek Shraya's "She the Mountains" and Shyam Selvadurai's "Funny Boy" address sexuality, as well as the social and political interferences in individuals' personal lives (Raj, 2018). The torture and humiliation endured by LGBTQ individuals deeply impact their behavior and psychology, pushing them further down in society. It is essential to recognize and address the systemic issues that perpetuate the marginalization of

LGBT+ individuals to promote inclusivity, equality, and human rights for all, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Progress has been made to promote acceptance and equal rights for the LGBT+ community, but challenges persist in major part of India as conservative attitudes and discriminatory practices still prevail.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, "The Boyfriend" is a well-written novel that effectively explores the themes of untouchability and homosexuality in India. The novel provides a unique perspective on the challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community in India and highlights the need for greater acceptance and inclusion of marginalized communities in Indian society.

A novel like "The Boyfriend" by R. Rao attempts to understand characters like Yudi and Milind, exploring the realities of caste, class, religion, masculinity, and the gay subculture. The book suggests that a gay man's attempts to escape the influence of identity markers such as class, caste, and religion do not lead to the formation of new collectives, but rather result in dangerous solipsism and detachment from the world. "The Boyfriend" by Rao aims to shed light on gay culture, while also addressing the issues of class and caste differences, in the hopes of inspiring social and political change.

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